

Senate Democrats and Hispanics are Working Together for a Better Future

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Democrats continue to advance a common-sense agenda that reflects what is most important to Hispanics and their families: access to a quality education; economic and retirement security; affordable health care; a strong national defense; and energy independence. The policy initiatives that Democrats will continue to advocate in 2005 will benefit millions of Hispanics and provide new opportunities to make America even stronger for future generations.

MAKING COLLEGE MORE AFFORDABLE

Democrats are committed to making higher education more affordable and accessible to all students in the United States and have consistently fought to increase the minimum Pell grants and expand the program so that more students receive this critical grant support.

While the enrollment of minority populations in post-secondary institutions continues to grow, participation rates for Hispanics still trail behind whites and Asians. Among high school graduates age 15 to 24, 34 percent of Hispanics were enrolled in post-secondary institutions, compared to 41 percent of whites and 51 percent of Asians. (Congressional Research Service, February 9, 2005)

Instead of working to reduce this gap, the Bush Administration has proposed eliminating two TRIO programs and the GEAR UP program, which provide services to help disadvantaged students complete high school and enter and succeed in college. In addition, the Bush Administration's policies will force nearly

1.3 million students to see a cut in their Pell Grants by a total of about \$300 million and 90,000 students may completely lose their eligibility for these grants. (*Boston Globe*, June 12, 2005)

STRENGTHENING OUR ECONOMY AND IMPROVING ECONOMIC EQUALITY

ENSURING CRITICAL CAPITAL TO START-UP BUSINESSES. Democrats know the important role small businesses play in the U.S. economy. We are fighting to expand the ability of small businesses to access the capital and resources they need to succeed. While Hispanics represent the second-fastest growing segment of small business owners in the United States, the four-year survival rate is lower for minority-owned enterprises than for non-minority-owned enterprises.

Democrats understand the challenges small business owners face. That is why Senator Kerry, the ranking Democratic member on the Small Business and Entrepreneurial Committee, recently introduced an amendment to provide low-interest loans to small business owners, including farmers (S. Admt. 825). Rather than encouraging growth in the small business sector, President Bush and Congressional Republicans have cut funding to the Small Business Administration (SBA) by \$85 million. Republicans also support privatizing Social Security, which would mean benefit cuts, increased costs, and regulatory burdens for small business owners. (Small Business Administration (SBA), "Self-Employed Business Ownership Rules in the United States: 1979–2003," December 2004; SBA, "Dynamics

of Minority-Owned Employer Establishments, 1997–2001,” February 2005)

INCREASING HISPANIC HOMEOWNERSHIP. Democrats know that owning your own home leads to long-term financial stability. Yet challenges to home purchasing persist for Hispanics.

- ♦ Hispanics have a lower rate of homeownership than their white counterparts. Forty-seven percent of Hispanics are homeowners compared with 76 percent of white Americans; and
- ♦ Hispanics who apply for a home mortgage also have a lower approval rate than whites. Seventy-one percent of Hispanic applicants in 2003 were approved for mortgages as compared with 80 percent of white applicants. (Esperanza USA, “State of Hispanic Housing in the United States,” June 2005)

Democrats have encouraged the Republican leadership in both the House and the Senate to strengthen homeownership programs, fair lending laws, and fair housing provisions in existing statutes.

PROVIDING FAMILIES WITH AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE

Democrats are working hard to close the health care divide in the United States. In April, Senate and House Democrats, working along with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Congressional Black Caucus, the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, and the Congressional Native American Caucus, unveiled a set of principles for addressing racial and ethnic health disparities entitled, *Closing the Health Care Divide*.

The Democrats’ *Closing the Health Care Divide* principles include:

- ♦ Expanding the health care safety net;
- ♦ Diversifying the health care workforce;
- ♦ Combating diseases that disproportionately affect racial and ethnic minorities;
- ♦ Emphasizing prevention and behavioral health;
- ♦ Promoting the collection and dissemination of data and enhancing medical research; and

- ♦ Providing interpreters and translation services in the delivery of health care.

Democrats are committed to moving forward with strategies to address health disparities. Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both Hispanic men and women in the United States today. Overall, Hispanics are nearly two times as likely to have Type 2 diabetes as whites of similar age. (CDC, “Eliminate Disparities in Cardiovascular Disease,” July 1, 2005; CDC, “Eliminate Health Disparities Diabetes Fact Sheet,” July 1, 2005) Hispanics are also less likely to receive cancer screenings than whites and account for a disproportionately large share of new AIDS cases. (Kaiser Family Foundation, June 2005) Democrats are working to reduce these disparities through legislation and adequate funding for existing programs.

Hispanics are hit especially hard by the lack of affordable health insurance: one in three Hispanics are uninsured. Since President Bush took office in 2001, the nation’s uninsured problem has grown much worse. The President has failed to provide a meaningful response, and his proposals could actually make people worse off. He and Republicans in Congress are seeking substantial cuts to Medicaid. Democrats are fighting these proposed Medicaid cuts and are seeking ways to expand health coverage, including supporting the *Immigrant Children’s Health Improvement Act* (S. 1104 and H.R. 1233).

Unfortunately, President Bush has chosen to further restrict access to health care by promoting programs (such as health savings accounts) that discourage employers from offering health insurance to employees and by reducing Medicaid funding over the next 10 years by \$60 billion in his Fiscal Year 2006 budget. Since 2001, the number of Americans covered by employer-provided health insurance plans has decreased from 65 percent to 61 percent. Meanwhile, the drastic Medicaid cut in the President’s Fiscal Year 2006 budget could prevent some of the nation’s most vulnerable people from accessing health care services. (Kaiser Family Foundation, “Employer Health Benefits 2004 Annual Survey,” September 2004; U.S. Census Bureau, “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2003,” 2004)

ENSURING A SECURE RETIREMENT

Democrats stand united to protect Social Security. We are committed to strengthening Social Security and ensuring that the program will be there for our children and grandchildren. Democrats believe that any changes in the program should be done right by first doing no harm, encouraging greater savings, and paying Social Security back what it's owed.

Hispanics have a significant stake in the debate on Social Security privatization:

- Without Social Security, 56 percent of Hispanic seniors would live in poverty;
- Hispanics have lower earnings and benefit from Social Security's "progressive" benefits;
- Hispanics live longer and receive greater benefits during longer retirements;
- Hispanics have a higher disability rate and rely on disability benefits more often; and
- Hispanics are less likely to have additional sources of retirement income.

The President's plan to "fix" Social Security includes diverting Social Security funds into private accounts, which would do nothing to strengthen the program. Instead, privatizing Social Security will dismantle one of the most successful public programs in the history of the United States, cut benefits for all Americans, and increase the national debt.

STRENGTHENING OUR NATIONAL DEFENSE

Democrats are working hard to provide our troops with the resources they need, by advocating for life-saving equipment such as up-armored High Mobility Multi-Purpose Wheeled Vehicles (Humvees) and body armor, as well as providing troops with key benefits, including access to health care, pay protection, and improved survivor benefits, to ensure readiness and support recruiting and retention efforts.

Hispanics have a proud history of service in the United States military. Currently, over 10 percent of the active duty United States Armed Forces personnel are of Hispanic descent. These men and women are serving bravely all over the world, including in Iraq and Afghan-

istan. More than 200 Hispanic military personnel have made the ultimate sacrifice in our nation's defense in Operation Iraqi Freedom. (U.S. Census Bureau, April 2003; Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, July 5, 2005)

Among those in the military, Hispanics disproportionately serve in dangerous positions, but are the least likely Americans to have health insurance. The President's budget shifts the burden of health care costs onto veterans by providing inadequate funding for VA health care, increasing annual fees and co-payments, and slashing funding for VA nursing homes and medical and prosthetic research. Every Senate Republican — with the exception of Senator Specter — voted to oppose legislation (S.Amdt. 344, H.R. 1268) introduced by Senator Murray that would have provided nearly \$2 billion to address serious shortages in veterans' services. (Pew Hispanic Center, March 2003; National Coalition on Health Care, 2004)

MAKING AMERICA ENERGY INDEPENDENT

Hispanic families — like all American families — are under increasing financial stress due to rising energy prices. America currently imports 58 percent of its oil, 5 percent more than when Bush took office. (Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, "Overview of US Petroleum Trade," May 2005) Democrats are working to reduce America's dependence on foreign energy sources and create jobs by increasing the supply of domestically produced clean, renewable energy and by increasing energy efficiency.

Senate Democrats successfully passed proposals opposed by the Republican leadership to move America toward energy independence. For example, Senator Bingaman introduced the Renewable Portfolio Standard, which would require utilities to produce 10 percent of their electricity from alternative resources such as wind, solar, geothermal, and biomass by 2020.

While President Bush has touted his own energy plan, which he admits will not lower high gasoline prices, Democrats have called on the President to: 1) pressure the OPEC foreign oil cartel to increase production; and 2) defer deliveries to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve. Unfortunately, the Administration has refused to take action, even though these initiatives would help stabilize rising gas prices.

